

# The Burden of the Righteous

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It's not that you didn't have doubts, and it's not that you never had to do something unforgiveable.

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# The Burden of the Righteous

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# Chapter 1

The young woman knelt among the tombstones and wiped down the black marble with a soft, damp cloth before carefully drying it. She'd already set the new *toba*, the name beautifully realized in her most careful calligraphy on fine, varnished wood, so now there were just offerings of flowers and some luxuries for the afterlife to make. The first time she'd visited the little cemetery, on the quiet hills outside Tokyo, the grave had been untouched for three years, and it had taken her an entire afternoon to bring it to something presentable. Now, however, it was a matter of an hour at most - but each time she visited she hoped, or feared, that someone else would have passed by and left a little offering. And each time, as this time, she was disappointed, or perhaps relieved.

She felt a chill as a cloud passed in front of the sun, turning white gravel paths to grey and muting the colors of the flowers she'd just laid. The shadow swirled and moved, resolving itself into tousled hair and a Sukajan jacket, and here and there in the dark was a hint of red, like light shone through glass.

"Ain't very Kiryuin to be late to your own birthday, Sis. That's more my style."

"It isn't very Kiryuin to be here at all."

Satsuki poured out a small glass of fine sake and set it down carefully beside the flowers.

"Died on your sixteenth birthday... That why you come here each year?"

To Ryuko's surprise, her sister seemed to bow and make a little prayer, but the words were lost among the summer birdsong and open spaces.

“So, who is it? A relative? If it’s a relative, shouldn’t I be doin’ this with you?”

“No... Not a relative. She worked for mother when I was younger. They were quite... close, for a time.”

Ryuko shifted awkwardly and scratched her neck; even after so many years Satsuki was still a puzzle box, full of hidden compartments.

“Right... Right... So a kinda auntie. The nice kind, always comin’ round, showerin’ you with gifts, that sort of thing. Not family, but as good as. Right?”

“No.”

Satsuki stood, and smoothed out the wrinkles in her skirt.

“I only met her the once.”

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She straightened her tunic and knocked.

Once. Twice.

Decisive but still deferential, the sound echoed on the antique wood of the double doors and reverberated in the small office.

Ten seconds. Twenty seconds. She stood awkwardly at attention, waiting for instruction, while behind her, the young woman at the desk continued to type with very particular concentration.

“Hououmaru... Is my mother...”

“Satsuki, my dear. Do come in.”

The voice seemed to seep from the crack beneath the door, as unctuous as if her mother were standing next to her.

Scratch-scratch-scratch.

Ragyo was working at her desk, and didn't raise her eyes as Satsuki entered and carefully closed the door behind her. It seemed to amuse her mother to annotate company documents using an old split-nib pen and a bottle of red ink, so that project proposals and financial reviews came back from her desk half-buried in red, like returned school work.

Scratch-scratch-scratch.

Ragyo wrote something further, dipped the pen in the ink bottle, and then her hand moved quickly across the page, the smooth unbroken path that Satsuki recognized as the *romaji* version of her signature.

There was a little snort of satisfaction, or amusement, and her mother placed the pen carefully in its stand and stoppered the bottle.

"I've just received your latest grades from the academy. Exceptional, as always."

She leant forward and rested her chin on her hand, seemingly suddenly curious about her daughter.

"But there's no need to push yourself so, Satsuki. Even without these marks your position as Student Council President would be unchallenged," there was a flicker of a smile, "given the academy's primary financial backer."

"It is no particular effort, mother. I can achieve nothing less, if I am to do what your plan requires of me."

The remark seemed to amuse Ragyo, who leant back in her chair and continued to review the report.

"Sciences... History... Politics and Economics... Kendo and Iaido... A new national junior record in heptathlon..."

She placed the report card down, and sighed.

“I thought I might retain that honor for a while longer, but it seems you’re desperate to surpass your mother in every way.”

She rolled her fingertips on the desk, letting her long, precisely shaped nails tap out a short fusillade.

“Well, I suppose I can let it stand.” And then more cryptically, “It will only be for a few years at most, in any case.”

The scent of aged leather, the subtle musty undertone of the ancient books: the room should have been warm and welcoming, but the line of discussion was jagged and unpredictable - Ragyo had never shown any particular interest in Satsuki’s schooling previously, simply seeming to assume that her daughter would excel, irrespective of circumstances. Trying to conceal her disquiet, Satsuki kept her gaze fixed on the bookshelf behind her mother, and the gold leaf titles of the weathered volumes it contained.

*Ἠλέκτρα - Elektra*

“Did you wish to...”

Once again her mother cut her off, mid-sentence.

“Some might say that I’ve neglected your birthdays, over the years.”

Satsuki continued to stare at the bookcase.

“You have always been most attentive, mother.” She had to spit that a little, but it came out naturally enough, or so she hoped. Ragyo picked up the report card again.

“My... Top marks in creative literature too. Your capacity for fiction must come from your father’s side of the family.”

She let that statement hang for a little while.

“But your sixteenth is approaching, and I thought you should have a proper gift.”

She replaced the report card on the desk and instead picked up a slim folder which she tossed lightly over for Satsuki to catch.

“You know how I disapprove of cheap trinkets. So I’m giving you something valuable. Some life experience.”

It was a REVOCS personnel file, the corporate logo embossed neatly into the plastic cover. The photo on the first page was familiar - a pretty young woman in her mid to late twenties, soft brown hair down to her shoulders. Satsuki looked at the name - yes, she knew her, or certainly knew of her. A young executive in the R&D division, there’d been a time when she had been seemingly omnipresent, accompanying Ragyo on overseas business trips and the company retreat to the Kusatsu Onsen which her mother had deemed such a success. That was more than a year ago now, though; months had passed since her last visit to the mansion.

“You want me to work shadow her?”

“Shadow, yes... but of a different sort.” The brown eyes were bright with delight and malevolent attention. “Are you familiar with the Hebrew Old Testament? Psalm twenty three, verse four?”

The room suddenly seemed too small: choking and claustrophobic. Satsuki swayed slightly; surely her mother couldn’t mean...

““Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death...””

Ragyo appeared delighted with her daughter for once.

“What a cosmopolitan young lady you’ve become. But be sure not to forget the religion of your forebears,” she narrowed her eyes slightly, “amongst all those heathen beliefs.” Ragyo relaxed back into her chair, letting an enigmatic smile play across her lips. “Alas - some of our employees don’t fully appreciate the *binding* nature of our non-disclosure agreements.”

Satsuki searched desperately for some sort of escape route; a path to avoid what was being asked of her.

“Is this not more in line with the skills and interests of the Grand Couturier?”

“Nui’s... *creativity*... brings problems all its own. She is likely to draw unwanted attention.”

“Then your more usual contractors...”

“No, this matter needs careful resolution, by someone that I can trust implicitly.”

Was this how the fish felt, when the hook pierced it and its head broke the water’s surface?

“I need to be sure, Satsuki.”

The object of that sentence was left unsaid. Within the folder were schedules of movements and appointments, plans of a small apartment in a central Tokyo tower block only minutes away from REVOCS’ head office: everything someone would need to make an unscheduled and permanent interruption to the woman’s life.

“Is there a problem?”

All trace of humor had disappeared from the voice, and when Satsuki looked up she could see serious, focused attention from her mother.

“If there’s a problem, I can always ask one of your ‘friends’. That is, if they’re as trustworthy as you suppose. Young Jakuzure has the requisite edge of cruelty perhaps, if I read her correctly.”

“That will not be necessary.”

She closed the folder and straightened up, compelling her body to some measure of composure by force of will alone.



“And no loose ends, Satsuki. You know how often they catch and cause the most careful of designs to unravel.”

“How soon...?”

Her mother waved her hand dismissively.

“There’s no particular urgency. Any time in the coming week would be acceptable.”

The mocking half-smile had returned, Ragyo seemingly satisfied with Satsuki’s agreement.

“I wouldn’t want it to interfere with your birthday party, after all.”

She was almost at the doors, the plastic folder flexing between rigid fingers, when Ragyo added, seemingly as an afterthought, “And I’ll need some item of proof, of course. It’s not that I don’t trust you, Satsuki, but *they* can be so particular about these things.”

*They* needed no further clarification.

“Just bring something suitably identifying. Use your imagination.”

The door handle was cold, smooth and unwelcoming, and as Satsuki turned it her mother saw fit to take a final, parting shot.

“But only average grades in Music... You really must cultivate some *joie de vivre*, Satsuki.”

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She still had the birthday party. Her friends had been expecting it, and to have cancelled might have been to court their suspicion. So she received their gifts with genuine gratitude and feigned interest, and they had sat and made small talk in one of the mansion’s smaller dining rooms; there’d been a cake too, baked by Soroi himself, which the others had found delicious, and to her had tasted like ashes.

At some point Lady Ragyo had appeared, nonchalant and curious. She'd needled the four with awkward questions - How were Uzu's grades? Did Nonon have a boyfriend yet? - but they'd accommodated her with smiles and good humor, as always, and for that Satsuki was more than grateful.

Then Satsuki had claimed that she was tired, and would need to rise early the next day for training, and she'd thanked them and sent them back to their respective homes. Nonon had loitered, waiting until the other three were well out of sight, beyond the gentle turns of the driveway, hidden by the summer foliage. She'd not said anything, but she'd looked at Satsuki with a concentration that she usually only applied to a new orchestral score - then she took her hand, stretched up on tiptoe, kissed her gently on the cheek and left too.

Satsuki had helped Soroi clear things away, putting off the moment when she would have to go to her room for as long as possible. The maids were surprised, but if he found it unusual then he kept that insight to himself.

"Good night, Lady Satsuki. And happy birthday."

"Thank you, Soroi. Good night." She'd closed and locked the door to her room. The click as the key turned in the lock was the crack of something irreplaceable breaking into pieces.

On the simple white of her bed sheets was a human silhouette shadow of equally simple black. A prototype military bodysuit, a mixture of Kevlar and carbon fiber, its apparent sophistication was still laughably crude compared to even a one star Goku uniform. But its simplicity was also its virtue: entirely human, untainted by life fibers, it was completely trustworthy. It wouldn't betray her when she needed it - if she needed it - and it couldn't reveal any secrets to her mother.

There were a pair of short swords too - composites of ceramic and hardened life fiber that would cut metal effortlessly. She was suspicious of those, but her father's research notes had seemed

conclusive. Hardened fibers were to a Goku or a Kamui what a nail was to skin: born from life, but not alive. Static and safe. And besides, if she couldn't trust the composite blades then she couldn't trust Bakuzan, and that was doubt Satsuki was unwilling to entertain.

*Bakuzan* . She wanted to take it, to feel its familiar weight and perfect balance. Each time she grasped the hilt she felt her father's hand around hers; she was five again, and full of hope for the future. But she wouldn't sully his creation with what she had to do that night.

So she put away Satsuki Kiryuin, Honnouji Academy Student Council President, as she hung her uniform within the wardrobe. She put that person away, and for a moment, as she stood naked in her bedroom, was just Satsuki Kiryuin, sixteen years old, a young woman who'd once had a father and a sister, and now only had a mother and perhaps not even that. She closed her eyes and listened to the sounds of the mansion as they ceased, one by one.

Then she pulled on the bodysuit, carefully checking the fastenings that it would permit her the freedom to move that she required, stretching and bending and allowing it to settle into place. The composite blades nestled in sheaths under each arm, her claws retracted and invisible for the moment under a fashionable black trench coat. She packed the remaining items she needed - her lock picks and portable terminal, the bodysuit's night vision mask - into a utilitarian black rucksack, slung it over her shoulders, and then it was Satsuki Kiryuin, assassin, that opened the windows that looked out over the mansion's grounds.

Just in view from her room, the sky to the east was now dark blue, black clouds barely visible against it. To the west it was still light though, clear blue fading to white and a blush of pink and orange where the sun kissed the horizon. It was a beautiful evening. Satsuki shook her head; it would have been more appropriate if there'd been a thunderstorm, so that the weather would have better matched her thoughts. She stepped out onto the little balcony, closing the French windows behind her, swung over the balustrade, and let herself drop.

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The paneling of the ventilation shaft flexed alarmingly as she landed, but it held, and the metallic resonance rumbled away to silence in the seconds that followed, inaudible beneath the cycling of air-con, elevators and the beating mechanical heart of the apartment block. Her portable terminal cast melancholy, mottled light over her face as she checked her route once again. The plans she had were accurate, but they failed to account for the age of the building; twice now she'd been forced to detour, fearful that the mountings or the conduit itself would not bear her weight.

That was the last descent. There was only a straight, level section now to take her to the target; ahead of her she could see the patterned interplay of light and shadow from the vent that would give her access to the apartment. She pulled the bodysuit's mask from her rucksack and donned it carefully, every detail of the metal passageway suddenly revealed in shades of green as the image intensifiers activated. There was light enough to see by, even without it, but putting on the mask, and hiding her face for the task ahead seemed... appropriate. Whether she was being careful, respectful, or simply fearful, was not something she wished to consider.

This was the final opportunity to turn back, but she felt trapped in the metal corridor that reverberated with careless movements, just as she was trapped within the plans that echoed with her doubts. Satsuki had known - she'd always known - that there would be a point in the future, most likely more than a year away, but certainly no more than five, when she'd be forced to draw her blade against another human being, someone as immovably convinced of the superiority of the life fibers as her mother. She'd thought it would be Hououmaru, or Kuroido, or one of the innumerable *yakuza* whose loyalty her mother had bought with money, lust or terror, or a mixture of the three, but it seemed instead that it was to be the woman slumbering in the apartment beneath her.

It was all a test - her mother probing the integrity of her loyalty, just as a sapper searched for weaknesses in the foundations of a castle. Perhaps her target was innocent of her alleged crimes, or perhaps

not, and perhaps it didn't even matter. After all, she worked in REVOCS' Research Labs; she doubtless knew as much about the life fibers as anyone other than the Kiryuins themselves - if Satsuki didn't face her now, then maybe it was only a matter of time until she met her on the battlefield, where there would be no opportunity and no need to debate the minutiae of justification.

The face in the file, though... the woman she'd sometimes seen in the distance at company events, hanging on her mother's every word, didn't seem like a soldier; she didn't seem any different to the scores of young women Satsuki had seen who graduated with hopes for the future: career, family, some measure of love and security. But perhaps all that was only deception; the last decade of her own life had been a hymn to subterfuge, and there was nothing to say that a pretty young executive was any more trustworthy than an out-and-out delinquent. Appearances were always deceptive; truth lay within.

Satsuki felt her resolve return. It was a military operation, just as every day for her was part of a campaign: a strategy she'd started to execute almost exactly ten years ago. She was a soldier. She would do her duty.

Uncomfortable, her limbs cramped and cramping in the enclosing space, she moved carefully towards the vent; nimble fingers slipped between the slats and removed fastenings, allowing it to swing silently open. She slid her legs out through the opening, paused, and then dropped to the floor with no more sound than falling petals.

Satsuki emerged in the narrow hallway, smart black shoes and an elegant umbrella neatly placed by the entrance, the bedroom in front of her. She pushed the door gently, pressing with her fingertips, and crossed the Rubicon.

By the time she drew the composite blades, she'd almost convinced herself that she was doing the right thing.

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"I'm sorry."

Her lips moved silently against the weave of the mask.

She made it quick - she had to.

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Out in the hallway Satsuki rested herself against the closed door to the bedroom. It had hardly been an exertion of any kind, but her chest was heaving and her heart hammering as though she'd just run a marathon.

But it was done.

She closed her eyes, breathed in and held it for a moment, before letting it out in one long, slow exhalation, feeling her heart-rate slow and the tension leave her limbs.

And then, from the door directly across from her, she heard movement. Not the familiar, immediately threatening sound of someone attempting to hide their intent, but the gentle creak of furniture or floorboards from someone entirely oblivious to her presence. The door was just pulled to - a thin thread of darkness along the edge of the gloss white panel - but it gave no opportunity to see inside.

Gently, she stepped forward, painfully aware of the slightest noise as she shifted her weight from one foot to the other. The door moved freely and silently on its hinges, revealing a small, simple room. There was a chest of drawers, and a little picture frame turned away from the doorway, and a single chair with its sole occupant a large stuffed toy: a bear, or a cat, or something in between. Pushed up against the far wall was a white wood frame, and within it Satsuki could see a bundle of sheets or blankets that shifted to reveal a small, peaceful face crowned with light brown hair, and a chubby arm that grasped at the blanket edge.

She had to get out. The bile was rising in her throat, bringing with it not sickness but burning self-destructive rage. She could feel herself disintegrate from the inside outwards, until all that was left was a thin

glass shell in the shape of Satsuki Kiryuin and the flickering corona of the black flames that writhed within, undulating like the poisonous tendrils of a deep-sea creature.

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She should have returned directly to the mansion, a straightforward traversal of the labyrinth of air ducts and conduits, following the thin red thread of guilt that anchored her to her mother. But instead she found herself on the endless circle of the Yamanote line, the rocking of the carriage like ocean waves, her bag swinging gently against her at each corner.

“The next station is Shinagawa. Shinagawa. Change here for the Tokaido Shinkansen, Keihin-Tohoku Line, Tokaido Main Line, Yokosuka Line, and Keikyu Main Line.”

Other passengers began to rise - a young couple, arms around each other; a balding, bespectacled businessman returning to his hotel. Salarymen crowded around Satsuki, their faces red with cheap sake, their ties askew and their top buttons undone, waiting for the doors to open. She felt a hand against her upper thigh, first just a touch, easily denied as accidental contact in the crush near the door, but then more insistent as the crowd grew impatient.

Satsuki grabbed the arm hard, at the wrist, twisting it and driving her shoulder first down and then upwards into the man standing behind her. She directed the compressed rage that had been building within her against that single target and propelled him into the far doors of the carriage with such force that the metal flexed and the hardened glass of the window cracked into a gunshot spider web.

Mouths were beginning to open in drunken outrage, but she rounded on his compatriots, feeling the black flames surge again just below the surface. The composite blades were slung in their sheaths beneath her trench coat, slight pressure on her ribs reminding her of their presence, and she watched with strange detachment as her right hand moved across her stomach and under her coat, acting with its own urgency.

The doors opened; a gang of teenagers, one or two years younger than her at most, piled into the carriage. They were shouting, reeking of cheap beer and spirits; there'd been a fight, or seemed to have been - some were clutching makeshift bandages to their heads, red eyes suggested others had been crying. A scruffy young girl barreled into her, knocking her arm to the side, and then slumped in the priority seating, eyes closed, headphones in place, oblivious of the need for an apology.

Satsuki looked at her empty hand for a moment, as though it were suddenly surprising, and then elbowed through the crowd onto the platform bare moments before the doors closed behind her.

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She'd pushed her way to the exit, fighting against the late night crowds that were streaming into the station for the last trains of the day; she'd pushed her way through, desperate to reach the surface of this ocean of people, and she'd forced her way into narrow side streets, and from there into an abandoned lot, an old factory awaiting demolition and regeneration near the river.

The building was familiar - the signs and logos stirring fragile memories. It was a clothes factory, another local manufacturer that had been driven out of business by REVOCS' superior scale and marketing savvy. In its open spaces, the skeletons of old machinery lay, row upon row, in a silent, intricate graveyard.

And in this desolate open space, Satsuki let the rage take hold, and roared. It wasn't a scream, it wasn't even the cry of an animal in the wilderness. Instead it was the sound of bitter winds rising from the depths of the abyss. She felt the mannequins press in on her, faceless and accusing, and found the blades in her hands once again; the straight ceramic edges were no more slowed by the rigid plastic shells than they would have been by dust motes and moonlight, and she was soon surrounded by dismembered torsos and stiff, unyielding limbs. But the gaze of the sightless eyes would not be turned away from her, and Satsuki sank to her knees, gasping for breath.



There was no meaning in any of it. None at all, if she had to sink to the same depths as her mother to see her plan through to completion. After what she'd done that night she was just a broken blade: unfit for battle, unfit to lead.

There was a way people atoned for their misdeeds, a way that had been accepted for hundreds of years. She could slash at her arms with the blades, but that would have been undignified for someone of her standing. And perhaps it would have been too easy.

One of her ancestors had once knelt in the middle of a broad courtyard, dressed in white, a slim dagger in front of her. The emperor himself had been present, to see that punishment for her crime - some little insurrection - would be suitably carried out. She'd been offered a second, a master swordsman to strike her head from her body when the single horizontal cut was complete, and she'd refused his services. Instead she'd just let her life flow out slowly, until she was a single island of white in the middle of a sea of dark crimson. She'd never made a sound, and she'd never taken her eyes from the emperor, or so they said.

It could have ended there, in a quiet courtyard under the cherry blossoms. It could have ended there, but she'd already had a daughter, who had a daughter, who had a daughter, down hundreds of years in a single unbroken cursed line.

Satsuki knelt in the dust, pulled her coat fully open and grasped one of the blades in both hands. She could feel the resistance of the bodysuit as she pressed the tip against her abdomen, flexible and resilient.

*It has to mean something.*

Now all that mattered was what would yield first: the armor, the blade or her resolve. She tried to remember the face she'd seen in the apartment, but though she could recollect the rooms in perfect detail - the paintings, the clothes hung on the wardrobe door, the colorful crockery on the kitchen countertops - the face was blurred, just a

smudge of darkness framed by white sheets and pillows. The bag weighed heavy on her back, but she wouldn't open it again, couldn't open it again. Not to see the unspeakable extent of her crime. So she closed her eyes, and drove the knife hard against the weave of the bodysuit, feeling it sever and slip between fibers until it pricked at the muscles of her stomach.

In the darkness behind her eyelids, she saw a child falling, red fibers trailing behind her like *koinobori* streamers. She pushed the blade again, and as the cut began she saw the child open her eyes, reach out a hand that was small like a doll's, and cry,

*"Onee-sama!"*

She stopped. Blood ran in a thin bead down the edge of the blade, and a single droplet fell and mixed with the dust on the floor.

*I will make it mean something.*

Slowly, deliberately, she opened her eyes and let herself relax, breathing out as she drew the blade carefully away.

*I will save them all. As many as I can.*

*I will bear the burden, I will bear it so that no one else has to.*

*Hell can take me, but not before I save them all. When it is done, I'll submit myself to the fires: gladly will I submit myself.*

In her mind's eye she drew out a sheet of smooth mulberry paper and her finest brush, and began to write the names of all those whose deaths she felt responsibility for.

Her nameless sister - whose fate might have been different had she, Satsuki, bonded with the life fibers.

Her father - condemned for daring to share the truth of her mother's plans with her.

The life she'd taken that evening - sacrificed in the hope that others, all others, would survive.

She would keep the list as short as she could, but she'd been deceiving herself if she'd thought that it would ever be empty; after all, she knew she'd never be able to expunge the first two names from the roster. The world could judge her one day for her actions, and she would accept its judgment without complaint; but to judge her the world would have to survive, to persist and flourish. And that was enough.

There was a needle and thread in the dust and debris around her, simple steel and plain red cotton. She rolled it between finger and thumb; it was strange to see something so familiar and feel no threat from it. The temptation was there to stitch the character “ ” into her cheek in red; it could be read as “Satsu”, after all. And it was also the first character of *murderer*, among other things. But that was just the guilt still clawing at her, and guilt was a self-indulgence, a luxury for better days.

She rose and left quietly the way she had come. The black flames inside her were little more than smoldering embers now.

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She didn't knock.

It was an unimaginable breach of etiquette, but Satsuki flung open the doors to her mother's office with no more concern than if she'd been entering the Student Council chambers. Behind her she could hear Hououmaru running to impede her progress.

“Madame Director, please accept my apologies but Lady Satsuki...”

Satsuki could hear the frantic words, and shifted slightly to give herself better access to her swords. Hououmaru could be quite a handful out in the open, but here in this room, with its ceiling and bookshelves, the whip-sleeves of her life fiber suit would be more a

hindrance than an asset, even more so if she didn't wish to damage any of Lady Ragyo's treasures.

At the far end of the room she saw her mother look up from her desk and slightly shake her head; behind her Hououmaru's charge was halted in its tracks by the subtle signal, and a moment later she heard the doors close again. Satsuki slung the rucksack down off her shoulders and reached inside - Ragyo's eyes were bright, her mouth slightly open in delight and expectation, but to Satsuki's surprise she pushed her chair back slightly from the desk.

*She's giving herself space to move. She really doesn't know what I'm going to do.*

Despite the darkness she was still carrying within her, Satsuki felt a sudden luminous burst of adrenalin and something that was almost satisfaction. She grasped the rucksack's slippery contents and swept her arm forwards, flinging them out towards her mother. The plastic bag crashed onto the desk, scattering the pens and cracking the bottle of red ink; it rolled to a stop and soft brown hair cascaded from its opening onto Ragyo's lap. For a moment her mother was silent.

"There was no need to be so theatrical, Satsuki."

"I imagine that comes from your side of the family."

For the second time that night, Satsuki's heart was pounding - but she wouldn't look away. She had to see this through.

"A simple photograph would have sufficed."

"They can be faked."

Satsuki knocked aside the suggestions, just as her mother would have done had she appeared with any less conclusive evidence.

"Then a finger, or an ear perhaps."

“You can survive without a finger, or an ear, or even an entire limb, if it’s a choice between that and certain death.”

She’d harnessed the rage, just about, and it was pulling her forward.

“But you can’t survive without a head.”

She pointed that remark, and Ragyo stared at her for a moment, then seemed to relax. Her face, which a moment before had been rapt with the anticipation of combat, reverted to its customary expression of arrogant nonchalance.

“Then there’s no possibility that our friend faked her death and is now enjoying a peaceful life in protective custody.”

“None whatsoever.”

“How characteristically thorough of you, Satsuki.”

Ragyo tapped her fingers on the desk, punctuating the silence as her daughter turned to leave. Satsuki was halfway to the doors when she stopped and looked back.

“She had a child.”

Ragyo looked up; her expression of surprise was almost convincing.

“She did? Oh yes, a daughter - a few months old. Did I neglect to mention? How remiss of me.”

Once again Satsuki could feel the struggle for dominance in their locked gazes.

“It seems the police were called to a disturbance in the building just after I left, and discovered her. I imagine she’ll be looked after by her father now, wherever he is.”

She’d made the call from an impressively antique payphone, out of sight of CCTV or even satellites. Her mother’s expression was a

question, but she deflected it with a stoic blankness of her own, and Ragyo was forced to respond instead.

"I suppose the child will just have to overcome that particular disadvantage."

She rapped out a little cadence of irritation with her nails on the desk edge.

"You might be tempted to become some sort of *fairy godmother*," Ragyo said the term in English, managing to impart a particular edge of contempt, "but I'd caution against further meddling in the child's upbringing. It wouldn't do for her to become suspicious and come looking here for her mother's killer."

Satsuki turned back towards the doors, and Ragyo chuckled slightly.

"Still, I suppose you could always offer her a scholarship to that academy of yours."

Satsuki didn't rise to the provocation; she was crashing, the foundations of adrenalin and rage were cracking and she needed to get out of her mother's sight before they gave way completely and left her citadel exposed. Her hand was shaking as she turned the door handle, but it was hidden behind her body, impossible for Ragyo to see.

"Oh, and I almost forgot." The words danced mischievously from the end of the room. "Happy birthday, Satsuki."

She stopped in the open doorway, but didn't look back.

"That was yesterday, mother."

The double doors rattled in their frames as she let the springs slam them shut behind her.

Ragyo listened carefully for Hououmaru's muffled "Good night, Lady Satsuki", and the purposeful steps of her daughter as she marched

to her quarters. Ink from the broken bottle was mixing with crimson from the bag in a little red peninsula, just as the sweet smell of decay was mixing with a familiar, nostalgic fragrance: the combination thoroughly intoxicating.

She had expected the task she'd set to break Satsuki, and the inevitable outcome to be failure and excuses. She'd expected it because she'd been certain that Soichiro's sentimental attachment to pointless human life had been passed on to his daughter: a thoroughly unwelcome inheritance.

In spite of that expectation, though, Ragyo was surprised to find that a tiny part of her, a part she assumed was some vestigial maternal instinct, had hoped that Satsuki would be successful, and would return for her blessing and embrace. But the belligerent superiority with which she'd actually presented herself had been utterly unexpected... That had more in common with the tortuous relationship Ragyo had had with her own mother, not the ascetic efficiency that Satsuki had manifested up to that point. Perhaps her daughter was a worthy Kiryuin after all, in defiance of her human frailties.

She allowed herself a half-smile of surprise and satisfaction, and ran her fingers through the brown hair that flowed across her desk, retracing the routes they'd taken so many times in the past.

*La vie est drôle. En effet, c'est drôle.*

Still, it was such a pity Satsuki's sister hadn't survived. Only children had a tendency to be spoilt and petulant. Too much of a mother's love, Ragyo presumed.

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Out beyond the gardens of the Kiryuin estate, through the forests with their hillside shrines, and along the course of the river, there was an isolated waterfall. The water there was always crystal clear and bitter cold, so that even by late autumn great sheets of surface

ice would congregate in the nearby pools that were untouched by its turbulence.

*Lot's wife looked back and was turned to a pillar of salt, and if Satsuki could have done the same she would have let the cold, swiftly-flowing water wash over her until nothing remained, and the only clue to her passing would have been for someone to dip their hands into the river and drink from it, finding it salty as teardrops. But to do so she would have to look back, and she could only look forward, forward now.*

On the rocks beside the river was a simple black bin liner, stuffed to overflowing with the bodysuit and rucksack. That was destined for the plasma furnace in the research labs, the one used to dispose of life fiber fragments: a convenient way to reduce the evidence to smoke and ashes. The composite blades would have to go in there too; Satsuki had grown attached to them - they were good tools, and she was as loath to throw away a good sword as a good ally - but they too were stained by guilt, and she longed to feel the pure weight of Bakuzan in her hands again.

The water had run red when she'd first stepped into the cascade - it seemed she'd lost more blood than she realized from the cut to her abdomen, and her skin was stained red-brown over her groin and down her leg. It was sore, but the cut was closing nicely, and if it left a little scar then she'd have something to remind herself of the night's sacrifices and resolutions. It would have been fitting to punish herself a little further - if nothing else, just to catch cold - but the night was warm and humid and the water was refreshing rather than chilling. There was no point in waiting beneath it any longer - to the east a sliver of blue was a premonition of the rising sun, and she pulled herself up onto the bank of the river and gathered her things. Satsuki reached for a towel to wrap round herself, and then hesitated.

*Adam and Eve ate of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, and saw their nakedness and were ashamed.*



She would walk back to the mansion naked as she was, over the harsh stones and through the thorny bushes, and for that distance, if no further, she would be innocent again.

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Sometimes she dreams of a different path. She takes the child; does as her father did; disappears, running from country to country. Though she forever sleeps with the twin blades under her pillow, no one follows them, there's never a face at the window, or footsteps behind them on deserted city streets. They travel far away, and she swaps mansions, and estates, and riches and responsibilities for nervous obscurity. The child calls her "Auntie Satsuki"; she takes a job as a translator, so she can stay with the girl and work from the one bed apartment that's now home. People shake their heads when they see such a young mother, but mostly they are kind. Their generosity is difficult for Satsuki to accept at first, but it becomes easier when her money runs low.

The child is two and a half, going on three, when the skies above them darken, and when they look up they don't see black swollen thunderclouds, but instead a fine weave of red fibers, extending from horizon to horizon. As the Cocoon Sphere collapses in on them, crushing the Earth before exploding in alien creation, the child clutches her leg, and for a moment calls out "Mama".

When she wakes she can't tell whether it was a terrible nightmare, or the most wonderful illusion.

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*Brief is this mortal life -*

*Let me go and seek the Way,*

*Contemplating the hills and streams undefiled.*

- Ōtomo no Yakamochi